

The English Leaflet

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CHARACTER BUILDING THROUGH THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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I

The teacher of language use, be it English or any other immortalized by a great literature, has a field of activity whose boundary suggests infinity. The opportunity of testing achievement is always with us, the stimuli for worthy endeavor are ever present, the standards offering further incentives are inexhaustible. We may all "die learning" with our faces toward the light. Thus we discern infinite possibilities in character building; for we realize the spiritual as well as the psychological truth that every stimulus brings some sort of reaction, either for strength or weakness, in the individual nature. Each day's opportunity leaves it better or worse.

One of our first objectives in teaching composition is that the youth shall "think without confusion clearly." Wise and purposeful action is obviously impossible unless one has this power.

In achieving this end vocabulary building is one of the best methods available. The student who has once attained a clear conception of the dignity and beauty of words, of their dynamic and ethical values, has traveled an appreciable distance toward his goal of strong manhood. We do well to be reminded that "God tried to teach us the value of silence by sending us speechless into the world; we learn to talk later at our own risk." Recognizing this risk we proceed with care.

The teacher's own vocabulary should be accurate and stim-

ulating, forcing active not passive attention. The student must feel the challenge; he must let no word get by him meaningless. By skilful questioning the teacher can find out whether the hearer's conception is right, for all experienced leaders know the lurking possibilities of misunderstanding. If the classroom atmosphere is what it should be, every student will have enough confidence and courage to play this word-game successfully.

Reading aloud by the pupils should be reclaimed from the disuse of the present, each possibility of gain in word knowledge being caught from every paragraph or stanza. A pupil thus guided discerns quickly the difference between his own active and passive vocabularies.

In writing, no inhibitions on account of lack of spelling power should be tolerated. The *right word* is of paramount importance and touches the author's integrity. He must be brave in "catching at mistake as midway help" in his eagerness to say exactly what he means.

Methods of developing this precision in the use of words are known to every progressive teacher. Précis-writing, as outlined in last month's issue of the *Leaflet*, is, of course, one of the best. The effort to grasp accurately the meaning of an author's work and to give it out again in briefer form, requires in both its aspects clear thinking and accurate word control. The speed element involved, especially as this exercise is practiced in England, makes its own contribution to the sharpening of the mental processes.

The encouragement of precision in word use will lead toward an understanding of the scope of science, the greatness of art, the nobility of religion. The wide-eyed boy who stammered, "I had no idea there was so much to know" and "I never knew before what fun it is to read," is growing a soul.

Some conception of what history means is discerned in studying the derivation and age of words. Tracing the stem of "father" and "mother" through the various languages proves the long existing sanctity of the home tie and the brotherhood of man in his groping toward community life. Young people must not lose their sensitiveness toward bonds like these. The record of such an effort must never be called "bunk."

My mother has the prettiest tricks
Of words and words and words.
Her talk comes out as smooth and sleek
As breasts of singing birds.

We had not dreamed these things were so
Of sorrow and of mirth.
Her speech is as a thousand eyes
Through which we see the earth.

There's nothing poor and nothing small
But is made fair with them.
They are the hands of living faith
That touch the garment's hem.

It must also be part of our endeavor that children become sensitive to the moral values of words. Granted that thought is impossible without language, "as a man thinketh in his heart so is he" gets an added meaning. There is peril in much of our modern slang other than what may be classed as vulgarity or poverty of vocabulary. Such expressions as "put one over", "get by", "get away with it" are not indicative of noble concepts as to courses of conduct. There is something significant in the fact that American slang abounds in more expressions of "smart" crookedness than that of any other nation; while many of us apparently have little or no conception of what Kipling's Brushwood Boy meant by saying, "There are things no fellow can do". The average American boy has much encouragement in believing that anything "goes" if he can only "get away with it". One of the bitterest moments of garish enlightenment in the experience of a promising teacher in a New England high school came to her when another remarked with a gleam of unselfishness, "Don't dream for a moment that your standard of honor will ever 'get you anything' here. They (the administration) can't even understand it". Such slang will be used, with its devastating results on the characters of our young people, until standards change, and both young and old are more anxious to be right than to be "in right".

Young people thus enlightened as to the moral values of words will guard more carefully the treasure-house of their own vocabularies. Words of loathsome meaning and immoral connotation will find no entrance. There will be no room for syllables that degrade, for all memory space will be given

over to whatsoever things are pure, honest, lovely, true, and of good report.

Further aid toward establishing habits of clear thinking may be found in the often disregarded "principles of composition" such as unity, coherence, and emphasis. It is important that the student should sense the truth that these three are just as much principles of living as of writing and speaking. What else does unity mean than singleness of purpose, "This one thing I do", and its being allowed to keep its dominant place? What else does coherence suggest than a sense of orderly procedure and intelligent method, an ability to refrain from putting the cart before the horse or mislaying it altogether? The modern boy getting acquainted with his father's automobile during the laggard months before he is sixteen, usually becomes keenly sensitive on this principle. And does emphasis lose any of its composition usefulness when explained as an assisting force in indicating and recognizing a sense of values. The girl who misses the train on account of undue attention to the curl of her hair needs a better idea of proportions before she attempts to make a home. My students tell me that one of the most stimulating of their theme assignments has been "A day at school without unity, coherence, and emphasis". I may add that their keen comments in these essays have been stimulating also to some of the older people whose mental vision had become a bit foggy, resulting in an undesirable complacency of character.

II

"To love his fellow men sincerely."

It is almost an axiom that most of the trouble arising from misunderstandings between people is due to inadequate acquaintance. The better individuals and groups know each other, the more peaceful their relationships; the older their fellowship, the more harmonious their achievement.

Our young people share today in the bitter and unenlightened partizanship of their elders. Hostility is in the very air they breathe. Many expressions in daily speech are saturated with unfriendliness. Class feeling is intense; witness such words as *snob*, *highbrow*, *rabble*, *guttersnipe*. A mis-

guided patriotism has bred a stupid contempt of other nations; "foreigner" is freighted with more unkindness than the "barbarian" of the Greeks or the "gentile" of the Hebrews. Religious dissension is still among us, and labor and capital have a long distance to travel before they meet on friendly ground. Political bigotry has reared its ugly head more disastrously than ever before in half a century.

In our attempts to guard against the carrying on of these hostilities by the young people now in the schools we find many possibilities of training through the medium of "composition". We accept the lead of the pragmatists in letting the students learn by doing. They must be given abundant practice in getting on with each. All classes in "oral composition" should be organized under a constitution drawn up by themselves and embodying their own aims and purposes. The leaders, also under wise direction, will see to it that every member of the group is stimulated to carry his share of responsibility and make the best contribution in his power to the "creative happiness" of the community. The members will learn to distinguish between the loyalty of shouting for their school and that of real service.

The number of activities which may be engaged in by such an organization is limited only by the length of the school term. One of our freshmen groups last year produced three magazines, designed and put up posters to conserve school property, presented two plays, ran cake-and-candy sales for the purchase of a lantern, filled a Christmas box for the poor, and left ten dollars in the class treasury toward the expenses of a graduation in which many of them had little hope of sharing.

In the actual written work done by the various committees, from that of drawing up the constitution to the reports at the annual meeting, there are many opportunities for the exercise of friendly supervision by the teacher. Then, too, the plans of the several program committees frequently include valuable and interesting papers on subjects which are themselves essential in achieving the aims of the organization. Floor talks may be kept on an edifying plane, developing knowledge, stimulating appreciation, and establishing ideals in an atmosphere of friendly interest.

Our debt to other nations may be recognized; many of the class discussions should have reference to the work of great men and women, not forgetting such leaders as Catherine Breshkovsky, Rabindranath Tagore, Yoshiò Markino, Madame Curie, Carl Schurz, Venezelos, Dr. Trudeau, Wu Ting Fang, and Booker T. Washington.

Even in communities especially sensitive on the labor problem it is possible for talks to be given revealing the causes of great changes in industry and the disastrous effects of prolonged misunderstanding; while class sensitiveness, never so strong among the younger children, becomes less liable to later development because of the mutual esteem engendered by thus working together. If anything needs to be accomplished, either in the school or community, that is within their power, the energy of the club members should be turned in that direction.

In such groups, if the teacher "knows her place", pupils will learn the lesson of human interdependence and acquire the "ability to admire greatly"; they will practice openmindedness and suspension of judgment, respecting honest differences of opinion, and recognizing that such differences do not "necessarily mean superiority or inferiority", they will sense the suggestiveness of Burke's "My opponent is my helper" and agree with the genial Sir Roger that there is usually "much to be said on both sides".

III

"To act from honest motives purely."

One of the menaces of modern life is the hypercritical tendency in so many phases of our civilization. Seldom is the creed of any organization, from the by-laws of a Main Street literary club to the articles of faith of the Christian church, sincerely subscribed to and honestly lived by. The "scrap-of-paper" state of mind is in league with the attitude which says, "No matter, so long as it looks and sounds well". The blatant "Americanism", one hundred per cent, of the profiteer neither began nor ended with the World War. In what Mr. Wells calls "the race between education and catastrophe" here is a task challenging the teacher's best effort.

Something to the good may be accomplished in composition work, I believe, by putting no literal or numerical rank markings on the returned themes. Such ranks are seldom accurate indications of achievement, and the students know this. In fact, pupils in large high schools have often found no little diversion in passing the same theme from teacher to teacher and noting with glee the varying marks, sometimes in inverse ratio to the number of times the theme has been "corrected". Also students not thus humorously engaged often consider the rank mark as the only thing of importance on the paper, and disregard, if left to themselves, all other annotations by the teacher. Instead of letters or numerals, clear statements should be made as to whether or not the student has achieved his aim, has "worked up to the hilt of his capacity", has preserved his intellectual integrity. In addition definite suggestions for gain in power should be offered. "There is not time enough?" Then ask for fewer themes.

The dishonorable proceeding of handing in as one's own work of another may obviously be dealt with by requiring frequent written-in-class themes and comparing results with the work prepared outside. More may be accomplished, however, from a character point of view by restricting required written work to subjects in the handling of which a student may be personally interested and eagerly sincere. My own experience with young people has led me to believe that all have something they would be glad to talk or write about, and when confidence has been established, there is no insurmountable difficulty in tracing a connection between such interests already existing in their hearts and minds and others which we know to be friendly to the soul. Anything will do for a point of departure.

In this process the teacher may often be much enlightened—as, for example, the instance of my own experience this year in acquiring from one of my "over-age" boys who at first morosely refused to do any English work, details on the pasteurization of milk. My ignorance upon this important subject awakened his sense of chivalry; he labored for my enlightenment, and expanded affably in the sunshine of my

really sincere gratitude, consented to journey to the library and gather information on Pasteur himself, of whom before he had never heard. Thus awakened, he traveled far, for a boy of his type, into the fascinating field of science and also toward a sensitive appreciation of the unselfish spirit actuating the great hearts "who perished, opening for their race new pathways to the common-place". He took other members of the class with him. They were glad to talk and write about their findings. They wished to be understood and enjoyed; such wishes resulted in highly desirable qualities of style and in work reflecting the scientist's love of truth.

The general problem of cheating must be handled by the students themselves and may be successfully attacked by articles written for the school paper. Some of these may be direct denunciations of such practices; others may be veiled in allegory, parable, or even a modern morality play. These must have, of course, no sanctimonious tinge. Rather they should be vivid revelations of youth's natural urge toward fair play by all.

In the interests of integrity it is important that every activity purporting to be run by students should be actually controlled by them. This does not question the wisdom of having faculty advisers, but it does deny their right to dominate, as they so often do, to the extent of killing all initiative on the part of the students. In debating clubs the coaching system prevailing in many schools is vicious. As has been suggested by one of the leaders in this field, the organized debate should be discarded in favor of the symposium plan, where the young people, having chosen a question for study and discussion, may go zealously in search of knowledge, and having found what they believe to be the truth, present that in their ablest manner to a thoughtful and discriminating audience. If such searchings after truth are imbued with the spirit of inquiry bearing on the large questions of the day, the schools will be brought into constructive harmony with the community life.

"We must send out workers imbued with the determination to seek and investigate truth—truth that will make them free—and to take great care that in the search for truth they

will never take part in or sympathize with those methods by which the edge of truth is blunted."

IV

"To trust in God and heaven securely."

On this part of my subject I find it increasingly difficult to write "with scholastic calm". Why must children be deprived of training in this the most powerful influence affecting human development simply because of sectarian jealousies and mistrust? Why should a whole roomful of young people stiffen into apprehensive attention at the casual use of the word religion, as I have many times seen them do, only to relax afterward into amazed relief as they find that no one's feelings are being hurt and that the religion referred to has no denominational name and is much greater than can be limited to any one church or creed? I do not agree with those timid souls who discern danger in recognizing in the classroom differences in religious beliefs. These should, I believe, be taken for granted as expressing natural variations of taste and opinion in no way detrimental to social growth, so long as they are cherished sincerely and *tolerantly*. In fact, I have often indulged the fancy that the various forms of worship known in our time are a kind of orchestration of humanity's yearning for religious expression. If one man prefers the instrument of incense-veiled ritual to that of clashing cymbals, or any other with more or less tradition, he will do wisely to attune his soul thereto. We perceive, indeed, much that we call discord which may, perhaps, "swell to music in God's ear".

Children, as Bernard Shaw says, naturally "take God for granted". It is our task to help keep this faith. We teachers of English composition have an almost sacred opportunity of discovering and meeting the spiritual needs of our charges. We realize our obligations as we read President Eliot's statement, "Nobody knows how to teach morality effectually without religion. Exclude religion from education and you leave no foundation upon which to build a moral character". Also that of Matthew Arnold, "Some kind of religious belief, sanction, and aspiration lies at the

foundation of every system of morality that has borne noble fruit in the world".

In approaching this great task we find no lack of assisting influences. Nature, art, and literature all offer many pathways to the Mount of Transfiguration. For example, let the student write on his own sensitiveness to the trees that "look at God all day", the "eternal sky full of light and of deity", the "certain flight" of the birds, the leaping of his heart as he beholds the rainbow, the majesty he discerns beyond the stars. Let him, if he chooses, "be still and know". Perhaps he will find inspiration in the Indian praying to the Great Spirit and delight in the historical values of the oath sworn by Kipling's strong men "On the hilt and the haft of the Khyber knife, and the Wondrous Names of God".

The attention of the class may be drawn to some modern Dolly Winthrop who seems to be finding in her own desire to serve suffering humanity conclusive proof of the enduring kindness of "Them above". With Principal Jacks the student will "find it hard to believe that the world is really worth what it seems to demand of us unless its demands are the expression of the personal and creative love of a single Being". The reverence thus inspired and strengthened may stimulate such love of service as to warrant our confident hope that sometime "the first question of our young people shall be not, 'What can I do?' but 'What of the things I can do, does the world need most?'"

V

I have, perhaps, revealed my theory, fortified to me by many encouraging experiences, that the teacher of English composition has at her service all means of inspiration offered in every other field of study and activity open to the student in secondary schools. She has but to discern the needs and desires of an individual or group—not always an easy task, to be sure—and then choose the best means of meeting them. Literature is, of course, as I have already indicated, our closest ally, and all its resources are ours. Have our pupils been reading "Westminster Abbey"? Let them stay awhile to talk and write thoughtfully about places of worship and memorials to the dead. George Eliot's "essential attributes

of a lady," the vows of Arthur's knights, Milton's noble attempt to "justify the ways of God to man," and Shakspeare's matchless inspiration, all offer incentives for helpful writing. But why enumerate further? The end is not in sight and never will be.

A similar opportunity to that offered by literature may be found to a certain extent in every other subject listed in the course of study. If a student's major interest is in mathematics, he will zealously, and to his soul's good, gather material for talk or theme on the famous men whose genius and desire to serve have traced a pathway to the farthest stars, weighing undiscovered planets in their course; bridged the raging torrents; tunnelled the mountains; opened with great difficulty an easy path from sea to sea; and made the air their servant. I have referred before to the inspiration to be found in other forms of science and art. We have no less assurance that in all subjects belonging to the manual and household arts, and in those making for accuracy and skill in business procedure there are many possibilities of steady-ing and defining the purpose of our students toward achieving for themselves and their associates a more abundant life. Problems in the athletic and social experiences of the young people are often brought to the teacher of English, and while they give us disturbing evidence of the dangers that threaten these ardent boys and girls, they also lift up our hearts by revealing fine traits of character and instinctive nobility.

Young people respond eagerly to leadership. In fact, we teachers often have cause to be alarmed at the confidence with which they follow any suggestion given by us. We wonder if we are making the wisest use of this our great power of influence and appreciate the encouragement Burke found in offering a plan that had in its personal presentation no power "to awe, dazzle, or delude" those to whose decision it was directed. Our courage must, however, be equal to our opportunity; for, as Dr. Johnson remarked to a still listening world, "Unless a man has that virtue he has no security for preserving any other."

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